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ABSTRACT

In studying the role of context in speech act performance, the tradition has been to use controlled elicitation instruments that allow for manipulation of social dimensions. The assumption is that by controlling social context, all respondents will assess social relations very similarly, although little research has dealt with the validity of this assumption. The current study explores the relationship between situational and cultural factors in producing requests and in assessing social dimensions in interaction. Data are drawn from a larger study of request performance by native and non-native speakers of English where two measures were used: an open-ended questionnaire that elicited responses according to contextually controlled situations and an assessment questionnaire that triggered the subjects' evaluation of social parameters. Results indicate that the perception of social dimensions in interaction, and their interrelationship, definitely have a significant role in verbal behavior. Further, a correlation was found between the subjects' assessment of social factors and their requesting behavior, such as in the level of directness shown in subjects' request responses. Contains 9 references. (Author/MSE)

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THE PERCEPTION OF SOCIAL CONTEXT IN REQUEST PERFORMANCE

Montserrat Mir

In studying the role of context in speech act performance, the tradition has always been to use controlled elicitation instruments that allow for the manipulation of social dimensions. By controlling social context, one assumes that all respondents will assess social relations very similarly although very little research has dealt with the validity of this assumption (Blum-Kulka and House, 1989; Spencer-Oatey, 1993). The aim of this paper is to explore the relationship between situational and cultural factors in producing requests and in assessing social dimensions in interaction. The data used here were obtained from a larger study of request performance by native and non-native speakers of English where two measures were employed: an open-ended questionnaire which elicited responses according to contextually controlled situations and an assessment questionnaire which triggered the subjects' evaluations of social parameters. The results of the study indicate that the perception of social dimensions in interaction, and more importantly, their interrelationship, definitely have a significant role in verbal behavior. Furthermore, an interesting correlation was found between the subjects' assessment of social factors and their requesting behavior such as in the level of directness shown in the subjects' request responses.

INTRODUCTION

In studying the role of context in speech at performance, the tradition has been to use controlled elicitation instruments that would allow for the control and manipulation of social dimensions such as social dominance, social distance, and so forth. It is assumed that by controlling the nature of social relations in interaction, subjects' verbal behavior could best be understood by referring to the social factors representing the context of the situation. However, this is a very indirect measure of studying sociopragmatic variation. How a subject verbally reacts in a particular situation cannot be analyzed on the sole basis of the researcher's subjective description of the social factors present in the interaction. Only the dialogic relationship between language, context and subjects' perceptions of social factors will provide the appropriate grounds for better understanding the role of social context in verbal behavior.

The interest in studying the role of context has led researchers from different fields to reexamine the notion of context and its effect on verbal and non-verbal relations. Traditional speech act theorists restricted the term context to the role of the hearer and the speaker in the interaction without considering other important situational factors such as cultural assumptions. Based on the notion of 'context of situation' first introduced by Malinowski (1923), Hymes (1972) developed the SPEAKING model in which a non-linguistic unit, the event, was the point of reference to study language use in context. Hymes' model was very influential for the scope of context for several reasons. On the one hand, it provided a quite structured framework of analysis which is still used quite

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successfully to examine and explain verbal use in situated conditions. Also, Goodwin and Duranti (1992) argue that Hymes' model was important because it allows for cultural descriptions of the most important dimensions of the event before or while engaging in linguistic interpretation. Such an approach favors an interactive relationship between language and talk that is essential to understand the process of language socialization (Ochs and Schieffelin, 1984). Nonetheless, in most studies of language and situations, one observes that the description of context before or after linguistic interpretation derives from the researcher and very rarely, an attempt is made to involve the participants in this description leading to the wrong assumption that speakers' perception of context directly corresponds with linguistic expressions in specific situations.

The relationship between verbal production and social perceptions can also be linked to the distinction established by Forgas (1985) between a sociocultural perspective and a more individual-psychological perspective on the study of language and situations. This distinction also appears reflected in the definition of situations. On the one hand, our culture and society provides us with a 'given' situational repertoire. On the other hand, every individual develops his/her own impression of the situation. In studying language use from a cross-cultural perspective we often disregard this distinction and language patterns and functions are interpreted only according to the sociocultural variation of the languages under study. The tendency is to look at large numbers of verbal responses across different contexts and draw conclusions about the situational repertoire of the culture of the subjects. However, the failure to examine how cultural social patterns and individual perceptions are linked results in a very limited understanding of how context influences verbal behavior.

Furthermore, in controlling social context in data elicitation instruments, the assumption is that all respondents will evaluate social relations similarly. Very little research has dealt with the validity of this assumption (Blum-Kulka and House, 1989; Spencer-Oatey, 1993). In the CCSARP, Blum-Kulka and House (1989) used a metapragmatic assessment questionnaire to assess some of the social dimensions represented in the situations used in the DCT (i.e., discourse completion task). They studied three native languages (i.e. Hebrew, German, and Argentinean Spanish) and included six social dimensions (i.e., social dominance and distance, rights and obligations, degree of difficulty and likelihood of compliance) to be assessed in five requesting situations. The results indicated that there were cross-cultural differences in the way the three different groups rated the social dimensions in specific request situations. More interestingly, it was also found that there was a correlation between how these subjects rated the situations and the level of directness displayed in the requesting responses offered in the DCT. Based on the results, Blum-Kulka and House claimed that the most important factor determining indirectness in request performance in all three languages was the degree of obligation in carrying out the request. Nonetheless, specific cultural correlations were also observed. For Hebrew and German speakers but not for Argentinean speakers the degree of social dominance of the speaker towards the hearer negatively correlated with indirectness. In their conclusion, Blum-Kulka and House clearly distinguished between two sets of factors affecting request performance: (a) cultural and (b) situational-contextual. According to these authors, cultural factors determine level of directness beyond situational variations whereas situational factors refer to the specific social dimensions in the interaction and their relationship with verbal behavior, as in the case of verbal indirectness in request realization patterns. This distinction

clearly resembles the one presented by Forgas (1985) in his definition of language and situations. Needless to say, the cultural and situational-contextual factors outlined in these distinctions are only worth considering when they are both equally taken into account in interpreting the dynamic, complex structure in which verbal behavior is shaped.

More recently, Spencer-Oatey (1993) further explored the assumption that different cultures assess social context similarly. In her study, two different nationality groups, British and Chinese, were chosen to examine the likelihood that they would hold similar perceptions of a given role relationship, that is, the role relationship of a tutor and his/her postgraduate student. The researcher focused on three aspects of the role relationship: superordination/equality, distance/closeness, and rights and obligations. The results clearly showed cross-cultural differences in the perception of the social factors involved. For example, it was found that Chinese subjects perceived tutors to be more superordinate to their students than British respondents did. Spencer-Oatey offered both practical and theoretical implications deriving from her work. Specifically, the author argues that more attention should be paid to the definition and measurement of social dimensions included in pragmatic research. For example, frequently, social relations such as familiarity are defined as dichotomies--familiar versus unfamiliar--without considering other factors that may influence the nature of this social dimension to the extent that different types of familiar relations can be observed within the broad category of familiar contexts.

In this paper, I explore the relationship between cultural factors and situational perceptions by examining not only how different native groups rate social dimensions but also how non-native speakers evaluate the context when they are placed in the target language setting. These results will indicate whether or not non-native speakers are influenced by the use of the target language in assessing social context and also to what extent social assessments are transferred from the first language into the second language.

METHODOLOGY

The data from this study come from a larger study of request production where three groups produced request responses to 24 situations. The total number of subjects participating in this study was 104. There were three groups of undergraduate university students. One group of 37 native Spanish speakers from the University of Salamanca in Spain served as the native Spanish population. There were 34 females and 3 males, with a total mean age of 23. A group of 34 university students from the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana provided the native American English data. In this group there were 24 females and 10 males, with a total mean age of 20. Finally, the interlanguage data come from a group of 33 native Spanish speakers learning English as a foreign language. In this group there were 29 females and 4 males, with a total mean age of 22. At the time of their participation in this study, these L2 learners were enrolled in their last year as English majors in the University of Barcelona, Spain, and thus, their proficiency level in English can be described as high-intermediate or advanced. Additional information about the subjects language background was obtained by a short questionnaire. The mean number of years that these subjects had spent learning English was 9.4 and a total of 85% of this population (i.e.,

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28 subjects out of 33) had been to an English speaking country for an average time of 2.2 months.[1]

The data elicitation techniques for this study involved two types of written questionnaires: an open-ended written questionnaire (OEQ) and a metapragmatic assessment questionnaire (MAQ). Two social variables were controlled in the open-ended questionnaire designed to trigger request responses. The two social variables were: degree of social distance or familiarity between the speaker and the hearer and degree of social dominance or power of the speaker towards the hearer. The familiarity factor had two levels: familiar versus unfamiliar and the power factor had three levels: powerful (Power+), no power (Power=), powerless (Power-). In order to keep these factors constant across all situations in the questionnaire, an attempt was made to maintain the same characters and their relationships with the interlocutor balanced in all contexts. For example, to describe a powerful relationship, situations were designed in which a boss had to request something of his/her secretary. If this context represented the familiar condition, additional information was given to ensure that the boss and the secretary knew each other. On the other hand, to represent the same power relationship but under the unfamiliar condition, it was made explicit in the description of the situation that the secretary was new at that office and thus, boss and secretary did not know each other. In order to have more than one sample for each combination of contextual variables, four situations with different actions being requested were created representing each variable combination. Here follows an example of one of the situations used in the OEQ (1) (see Appendix for a brief description of all the situations).

(1) You are the boss in a small company. Your secretary has worked for you for the last five years and you know each other quite well. Tomorrow you are going to meet with a very important client and you haven't finished preparing the report you have to give him. It is almost the end of the day and you want to ask your secretary to stay after office hours to help you with this report. What would you say?

After answering the open-ended questionnaire, subjects were asked to complete a metapragmatic questionnaire in which a description of the 24 situations included in the elicitation task was presented followed by a three point scale, where 1 represented the lowest point and 3 the highest. Subjects were asked to rate three social variables: familiarity, power and degree of imposition of the action being requested. The native language groups assessed the situations in their native languages whereas the non-native subjects completed the assessment questionnaire in English, that is, their target language. Here follows the above sample test item as it appeared in this questionnaire (2).

(2) You are the boss in a small company. Your secretary has worked for you for the last five years and you know each other quite well. Tomorrow you are going to meet with a very important client and you haven't finished preparing the report you have to give him. It is almost the end of the day and you ask your secretary to stay after office hours to help you with this report.

A. Familiarity:	Familiar	3	2	1	Unfamiliar
B. Power:	High	3	2	1	Low
C. Imposition:	High	3	2	1	Low

The metapragmatic source of information from this questionnaire was intended to address several issues: First, the results from this questionnaire will help account for the type of request strategies offered by the subjects in the production task. Second, this questionnaire also serves as a way to test the value of the social factors in building the situations in the OEQ. Finally, although only two social variables were included in the design of the situations (familiarity and power) and moreover, an effort was made to control the degree of imposition of the action, a look at the description of the situations reveals that variation in the type of actions may have an effect on the subjects' request responses. Hence, the decision to include the degree of imposition factor in the rating task was made in order to observe the effect of this variable on subjects' request responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Spearman rank-order correlation analyses were conducted to compare the ratings for the three social variables across the three groups from the MAQ. The results from these analyses indicated that the rankings for the 24 situations by the three groups were positively correlated for the familiarity and power social variables but not for the degree of imposition variable. Spearman rank-order correlation coefficients for the familiarity and power parameters paired across the three groups ranged from .66 to .93 ($p < .001$).[2]

Interestingly, for the three groups the highest correlation was shown in the power social variable rankings whereas the lowest correlation appeared in the familiarity variable rankings. These results help understand the distribution of request strategies in the different contexts found in the responses from the OEQ. In those analyses, it was found that the three groups showed similar requesting behaviors in contexts characterized by the type of power relationship between the interlocutors. For example, the highest percentage of direct requests displayed by the three groups was in situations where the speaker was in a powerful position. However, the three groups varied their distribution of request strategies on the basis of the familiarity social variable. For example, although the highest percentage of hints were displayed in situations where speaker and hearer shared the same power in the relationship, native English speakers produced more hints in familiar contexts, L2 learners offered more hints in unfamiliar contexts, and native Spanish speakers offered a similar number of hints in both conditions.

As mentioned, one objective of the assessment questionnaire was to test the value of the use of social variables in building the OEQ. A closer look at the ratings from the three groups showed that native Spanish speakers were the group that came closest to the intended values depicted in the social contexts in the OEQ. They clearly differentiated between familiar and unfamiliar conditions and between the three different degrees of power represented in the situations. The native English speakers showed the greatest disagreement with the initial social assessments of the situations in the OEQ. Nonetheless, the overall rating scale displayed by each of the three groups was in general

agreement with the values attached to social variables in building the situations in the OEQ.

An interesting outcome in the familiarity ratings is the interaction between familiarity and power parameters in the rank orders. Most evaluations of degree of familiarity between interlocutors corresponded with the evaluations of the power relationship, particularly in the case of native Spanish speakers and L2 learners. The highest familiarity ratings were given to situations where the interlocutors knew each other and shared the same power status (Fam./Power=) and the lowest ratings corresponded to situations where interlocutors did not know each other, and the speaker was in a powerless position (Unfam./Power-). The exact rank order of familiarity ratings from high to low based on the power parameter included the following situation-sets: Fam./Power=, Fam./Power+, Fam./Power-, Unfam./Power=, Unfam./Power+, and Unfam./Power-.

In the case of the power rankings, the pattern displayed is more complex. Once again, the native Spanish speakers and the L2 learners showed the greatest agreement on the correspondence between power and familiarity evaluations. However, the following pattern was observed in the three groups. In situations in which the requester was more powerful than his/her interlocutor (Power+), subjects rated the unfamiliar contexts higher in power than the corresponding familiar situations. In the powerless conditions (Power-), subjects rated the unfamiliar contexts lower in power than the familiar ones. Finally, in situations where speaker and hearer shared the same power status (Power=), familiar and unfamiliar conditions did not make a difference and a random pattern appears in the ratings. These results seem to lead to the following conclusion. In situations where power relations are fixed and known by the interlocutors, the degree of familiarity will play an important role. In fact, in interactions such as the one depicted in Power+ situations where a boss makes a request of his/her secretary, the fact that the speaker and the hearer do not know each other, results in a perception of the power relation as being higher than in the corresponding familiar interaction. Similarly, in a fixed status powerless situation, such as the one between a student requesting something of a professor, the fact that the student knows the professor results in a perception of the power status of the speaker as being lower than in an unfamiliar context.

These findings show that attributes that are commonly applied to participants in conversation as fixed phenomena, such as social dominance or familiarity, are in fact not static, but context dependent, and thus, may change or vary depending on the setting, the action and also the interlocutors' attitude towards the interaction. Similar findings were also observed in the CCSARP (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), although in their assessment of the situations other social variables were also included. Interestingly, the CCSARP researchers stated that using only the results of the assessment questionnaire is insufficient to determine to what extent the subjects' social assessments of the context were motivated by the type of roles the speakers were asked to play and thus, were influenced by the situation, or they were motivated by the social-institutional roles, already stereotyped in the social structure. Nonetheless, regardless of the real motivating force underlying these assessments, the CCSARP and the present findings are still useful in examining the type of perceptions that different cultures have towards certain social

roles or positions in society since in all verbal interactions speakers are forced to play a certain role which is also determined by the context and the type of activity to be performed.

No correlation was found between native Spanish and native English ratings and between native English and L2 learners' ratings for the degree of imposition variable. This result was somewhat expected because this variable was not included as a control variable in the design of the OEQ and although an attempt was made to include requesting actions that shared similar imposition demands, each situation involved a different requested action which resulted in different subjects' perceptions of the degree of imposition of the requested action. Interestingly enough, native Spanish speakers and L2 learners' ratings again showed a significant positive correlation of .76 ($p < .001$), which seems to indicate cross-cultural differences in the perception of this social variable between the American English culture and the Peninsular Spanish culture.

Due to the lack of correlation between the ratings of this social variable across the three groups, One-way ANOVAS and Post-Hoc Analyses for each situation were carried out to discover specific cross-cultural differences in social perceptions. Statistically significant cross-cultural differences in the ratings assigned to the degree of imposition variable were revealed for 12 of the 24 situations in the OEQ. The results in Table 1 show the situations in which significant differences were obtained.[1]

Table 1: Significant Group Differences in Subjects' Perceptions of Degree of Imposition of Situations in the OEQ.

	Social Variables			Degree of Imposition			
Situation #	Familiarity	Power	Description	English	Spanish	L2 Learners	F Value
2	Familiar	Power+	Make coffee	1.6 (17)		2.1 (2)	3.60*
3	Familiar	Power+	Photocopy documents	1.3 (24)	2.0 (9)	2.1 (8)	10.7**
5	Familiar	Power=	Borrow friend's notes	1.4 (22)	1.8 (11)		3.41*
7	Familiar	Power=	Clean the kitchen	1.7 (15)		2.2 (4)	4.11*
10	Familiar	Power-	Get an extension	2.3 (6)	1.4 (23)	1.5 (21)	18.81*
13	Unfamiliar	Power+	Type a report	1.9 (13)	2.6 (1)	2.6 (1)	14.68*
15	Unfamiliar	Power+	Bring a sandwich	1.5 (20)	2.2 (4)		6.04*
16	Unfamiliar	Power+	Make reservations	1.5 (19)	2.3 (3)	2.3 (3)	10.61*
17	Unfamiliar	Power=	Borrow a computer	2.6 (2)	1.5 (19)	1.5 (19)	34.42*
22	Unfamiliar	Power-	Borrow a book	2.3 (3)	1.4 (24)	1.5 (22)	17.35*
23	Unfamiliar	Power-	Borrow a paper	2.3 (4)	1.7 (13)	1.4 (23)	12.31*
24	Unfamiliar	Power-	Read student's paper	2.3 (5)	1.7 (14)	1.6 (17)	9.87*

*$p < .05$. **$p < .001$.

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The results in Table 1 clearly reveal some cross-cultural differences in the perception of the degree of imposition of the requesting actions in the questionnaire. First, in all Power+ situations (#2,3,13,15,16), regardless of Familiarity, Spanish speakers perceived the actions being requested as more imposing than English speakers. This is an interesting result because these actions involved a type that one would associate with the world of a secretary, such as making photocopies or typing a report and other less secretarial duties such as bringing in a sandwich or making coffee. However, despite the possible differences in the activity type, the trend was to perceive all these requests as more of an imposition by the two Spanish groups, the native Spanish and the L2 learners. Based on my limited knowledge of the world of the secretary, I would like to suggest a possible explanation for this behavior. Secretaries in the US. do not seem to have many responsibilities that involve decision making. Many of the activity types that they are engaged in are very simple tasks such as typing, mailing or minor accounting services. On the other hand, secretaries in Spain seem to have more opportunities to make important decisions themselves without being asked to do so. Consequently, for a Spanish speaker the idea of asking the secretary to make coffee, bring a sandwich, make photocopies or even type a report that the boss lost in his/her computer may not seem to be the secretary's responsibilities and thus, these actions are perceived as very imposing. Nonetheless, the difference in the two cultural groups' perceptions of the degree of imposition of the requests illustrated here provides a clear example of the effects of cultural norms on the interpretation of social actions and thus, on the type of verbal behavior displayed in similar contexts across cultures.

At the other end of the power continuum, we find that in contexts where the speaker was in a powerless position (#10,22,23,24), the opposite behavior occurred. Native English speakers perceived the actions being requested as more imposing than Spanish speakers. English speakers seem to be influenced by the type of relationship between the interlocutors and the fact that the speaker is in a powerless position may be responsible for the perception of the actions being requested as very imposing--that is, the actions being requested are not as important to determine their degree of imposition as the fact that the person asking the request is in a powerless position towards the person responding to the request. Spanish speakers, on the other hand, do not seem to base their perceptions of the degree of imposition of these actions on the social dominance relationship between the speaker and the hearer. The type of action being requested seems to be the key factor in triggering these perceptions for the Spanish group. The requests in Power- situations could be interpreted as permission requests rather than action requests. The requests to borrow the professor's paper or book or give the student an extension on a paper do not require the hearer to perform any physical action but to grant something to the hearer--a book, a paper, or an extension, which may explain why Spanish speakers assessed these requests as less imposing than English subjects. In the case of requesting the professor to read the student's paper, differences between groups' perceptions were statistically significant and Spanish speakers perceived this action as less imposing than English speakers, but Spanish subjects also assessed this action as more imposing than the other Power- requesting actions in the group. In this situation, the speaker has to ask the hearer to do an action that will be costly to the hearer in terms of the time or effort needed to read the student's paper and provide feedback. In the other Power- situations, the type of permission requests involved do not seem to be costly to

the hearer which may explain the lower degree of imposition ratings offered by the Spanish groups in comparisons with the English subjects. Consequently, based on these results the costs and benefits involved in the requests may have played a relevant role in assessing the weight of the imposition of the actions being requested in these contexts for the Spanish group. For the English subjects, the costs and benefits may not have been such an important factor in determining the degree of imposition of the requested actions here as the type of powerless position in which the speaker finds himself in these requesting situations, which would explain why this group perceived these requests to be more of an imposition than Spanish speakers.

Finally, in contexts where interlocutors are not differentiated by the power status between them (#5,7,17), the three language groups again behaved differently. Spanish speakers evaluated requesting that a friend lend some notes (#5) and clean the kitchen (#7) as more imposing than native English speakers did. In unfamiliar conditions, native English speakers perceived the requests to borrow a student's computer as more imposing than the Spanish speakers. This result needs to be explained in terms of the subjects' direct relationship with computers. Today computers are more than just a tool. For many of us, regular computer users, computers have become a very personal instrument where our thoughts are secretly stored. This may explain why Americans perceive the action of lending their computer to a stranger very imposing. On the other hand, the lack of familiarity and availability of computers in the Peninsular Spanish context may explain why Spanish speakers do not view lending a computer as very imposing since for many of these speakers a computer is only a powerful typewriter.

If only the types of actions being requested were considered, regardless of the social variables defining the interlocutors' relationship, the results from Table 2 would seem to indicate that situations where the requester had to borrow something from the hearer were overall considered to be more imposing by native American English speaking subjects than by the Spanish respondents (#17,22,23). However, if such a generalization wants to be maintained, one would have to wonder why American subjects assessed situation 5, where a friend requests another friend to lend him/her some class notes, to be less imposing than the way Spanish subjects did. Such a finding seems to contradict the generalization above established which indicated that Americans in general seemed more reluctant to want to lend anything than Spaniards. However, this type of contradiction is only another piece of evidence for the dynamic relationship existing between the different social aspects present in an interaction, including not only the type of human relationships but also the interlocutors' perceptions of actions or physical objects involved in the communicative act.

Having established cross-cultural differences in the assessment of certain social variables in interaction, the next step is to try to relate these assessments to the degree of indirectness of the request responses in the OEQ. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed between the ratings given in the assessment questionnaire and the level of indirectness shown in the responses from the OEQ.[6] The results of these analyses are presented in Table 2.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Coefficients between Contextual Factors and Indirectness

Factors	English	Spanish	L2 Learners
Familiarity	-.14	-.18	-.13
Power	-.17*	-.07*	-.20*
Imposition	-.11	-.14*	-.16*

*p < .05

These results show that only one factor, power, negatively correlates with indirectness in all three cultures. The higher the degree of power in the speaker towards the hearer, the less indirectness is to be expected. For Spanish speakers, regardless of whether they speak in Spanish or in English, a negative correlation also exists between the degree of imposition of the action being requested and the degree of indirectness of the request. The higher the degree of imposition, the less indirectness will be manifested in the request. Finally, the degree of familiarity between interlocutors does not seem to correlate with the level of indirectness in the speakers' requesting behavior for any of the three groups.

These results support what was found in the request forms used by the subjects to respond to the items on the open-ended questionnaire. The three groups of subjects utilized the highest proportion of direct requests in contexts where the speaker was in a powerful position. For example, here are some of the responses utilized by different subjects in these work-related requesting contexts. Model (encouragement of the request): "We'll need some coffee in here, Jerry. Please bring some." Also when work is help me finish the report." Also, it is interesting to notice that the distribution of direct request strategies in these situations was not determined by the familiarity factor. A high proportion of direct requests was observed in both familiar and unfamiliar work-related contexts.

More directness also correlated with a higher degree of imposition of the requested action but only in the case of Spanish speakers and L2 learners. This result is also supported by the rank order correlations of the assessments by Spanish speakers in power + situations where these subjects evaluated the actions in power + contexts as very imposing.

In the CCSARP project, the correlation coefficients between subjects' assessments of the contextual factors and the level of indirectness revealed that degree of obligation to carry out the act and degree of social dominance were, among others, important factors influencing level of indirectness in a request. The degree of obligation included in their analyses may help us understand the results obtained in the assessment of degree of imposition in this study. Note that situations in which a boss requests something of a secretary were viewed as highly imposing by the Spanish group and the L2 learners. This

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could argue that in those contexts a perception of a high degree of obligation to carry out the request could be expected due to the fact that the secretary works for a boss and therefore, the secretary feels obligated to respond to the boss' demands, which also explains why more direct requests were offered in those contexts by the three groups.

Since the degree of obligation factor and other factors such as the right to make the request, the estimated likelihood of compliance, and so on, were not included in this analysis, it is difficult to ascertain the exact nature of the relationship between degree of imposition and use of directness in requesting behavior. However, these findings suggest that Spanish speakers perceive the weight of certain social factors differently from native English speakers and more importantly, these assessments still exist when the speaker is placed in the target language setting.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper began by addressing the issue of controlled elicitation techniques and their inherent assumption that a systematic control of social variables in interaction will lead to the interpretation of situated language use. In order to re-examine the validity of this assumption a study was carried out with two specific objectives in mind: First, to test to what extent native and non-native speakers would assess context similarly and secondly, to further explore the relationship between situational factors and the subjects' requesting behavior. The use of the metapragmatic assessment questionnaire was intended to address these issues.

The results have shown that the three groups under investigation assessed some of the situations in the MAQ from a cultural perspective, which could help interpret the observed subjects' requesting behavior. For example, it was clear that the three groups assessed power relations in the situations very similarly. However, the degree of familiarity between the speaker and the hearer was perceived slightly different by the two native cultures. More importantly, this study has shown that perceptions of different elements of the context are highly interdependent and thus, how a power relationship is assessed will depend on how the degree of familiarity or degree of imposition of the action are perceived. Furthermore, this interdependency becomes more complex when different cultures are taken into account. Cultural differences and/or similarities between how subjects perceive context are determined not only by the value of specific social factors within the cultural social norm system but more importantly by how these specific social factors influence each other in determining the type of verbal or non-verbal response expected in particular contexts. The most clear example of this interaction was found in the analysis of the situations where the three groups assessed the degree of imposition of the action significantly different due to cultural norms with regard to the interrelationship between social elements in the situation.

Several implications and concerns arise from this investigation. First, an understanding of the subjects' individual perceptions of social context in interaction is totally necessary if we are to understand the relationship between the given sociocultural repertoire about contextual factors that every individual brings into the interaction and

its effect on verbal behavior. Metapragmatic assessment questionnaires are a useful tool to obtain introspective and retrospective information about the subject's underlying motivations in providing verbal responses to particular situations. Instead of trying to explain verbal responses only on the basis of what or how subjects respond in specific contexts, we need to study how subjects evaluate the social context of the interaction because we cannot assume that all subjects perceive context similarly.

Furthermore, assessments of social factors in interaction are useful to confirm the researcher's intuitions in building contexts in controlled elicitation tasks. As it was shown in my study, Spanish speakers in L1 and L2 were the ones that came closer to my assessment of the social factors described in each situation. I am a Peninsular Spanish speaker who has been in the US for more than six years and I still evaluate the weight of certain social factors according to my native culture rules. Closely related to this issue is the well-known concern in controlled elicitation studies of trying to control for as many variables as possible. However, by including more variables, the analysis becomes more complicated because as we have seen, the interaction between the different elements of the context is what really determines the type of verbal behavior displayed. Consequently, because in elicitation tasks we cannot control for everything, we should at least ensure that subjects have a chance to evaluate the weight of all the possible social variables present in each situation. In the present study, only three social variables were included to be assessed in the MAQ, but there are many other social factors present in the situations that could not be included due to the length of the questionnaire. Furthermore, as Spencer-Oatey (1993) mentions, scales of three points are not sensitive enough to the perceptual differences to be expected in social assessments where how a social factor is perceived depends on the presence and weight of other situational factors in the interaction. Scales of five or seven points would be more suitable for accurate social assessments.

Another important implication deriving from social assessments is that context is not a static entity that can be studied by isolating social factors independently of each other. As this study has shown, social factors such as power and familiarity were evaluated in relation to each other in the interaction and not as absolute independent phenomena. This has an important research implication for studies which use controlled elicitation tasks where social factors are directly related to linguistic expressions. Such an approach has a negative effect on the reliability of the generalizations drawn from the data due to the intricate structure of contextual factors affecting verbal responses. Consequently, in controlled elicitation studies, any claims about the weight of certain social relations such as familiarity or power should be taken with caution. Instead more attention should be paid to how subjects behave in specific contexts, such as in the computer situation described above, if we want to achieve an acceptable understanding of cultural values in context perception and its relationship to talk.

Finally, it is interesting to observe that in studying the language use of second language learners we should not only look at linguistic transfer but also at the transfer of social assessments in order to explain linguistic behavior and situations. The use of the target language is independent from how the subject perceives context. In analyzing the requesting behavior of these learners, it was found that their requesting realization

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patterns showed clear signs of L1 transfer although an approximation of English standards was also evident in terms of request strategy usage. For example, the frequency of use of direct requests by the L2 learners was lower than the one observed in the Spanish data and thus, approximating the low frequency displayed in the native English data. It is interesting to note, then, that although these learners perceived the weight of situational factors in English contexts as the way native Spanish speakers did, the learners were able to approximate American standards in their requesting realization patterns. This possible mismatch between how L2 speakers perceive context and how native-like they can verbally behave in the target language should be considered for further research. Nonetheless, one needs to keep in mind that this was a production study where individual social assessments were related to requesting behavior and therefore, nothing can be said about the appropriateness or effectiveness of the second language learners' requesting behavior. Therefore, more research is needed to study to what extent transfer of social assessments is related to the appropriateness of the L2 speech.

In conclusion then, we should not assume that in building controlled elicitation tasks where social variables are controlled and represented in many contexts, subjects are going to assess social factors similarly among themselves and also as the researcher planned them. Claims about which certain social relations are responsible for the observed verbal behavior cannot be made without considering how individuals perceive context. Furthermore, in studying second language verbal patterns and functions, we should not assume that the use of the target language will predict target-like social assessments and consequently, it is not enough to study native language groups' social perceptions to explain second language behavior.

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NOTES

[1]Since exposure to the target language is a major element in a complete acquisition of the sociolinguistic norms of the second language, only subjects who had been exposed to an English culture for less than five months were included in the study. Originally a group of 41 Spanish speakers learning English in Spain participated in the study. However, since eight of those subjects had spent more than five months in an English speaking country, they were not included in the analysis of the data.

[2]Coefficients are as follows: Familiarity: native English and native Spanish .66; native English and L2 learners .71; Power: native English and native Spanish .93 and native English and L2 learners .92 ($p < .001$).

[3]The numbers in the Degree of Imposition column read as follows: First, the rating means of the assessment questionnaire are only given for significant group differences shown in the Post-Hoc test. Therefore, if only the means for two groups are given, this indicates that the mean for the third group did not reach significance. Secondly, the number in parenthesis following the rating means represents the rank-order given by the group subjects for the specific situation. Note that the rank order goes from high to low, so that 24 is the least imposing and 1 is the most imposing.

[4]Level of indirectness was assessed following the coding scheme used in the CCSARP to classify request responses. According to this coding system, requests are categorized into three main categories based on an indirectness scale: direct requests, conventional indirect requests, and non-conventional indirect requests. A scale of three points was assigned to the request responses classified according to these three categories where 1 corresponded to the most direct strategies and 3 to the less direct. The means obtained across all the situations were used in the analyses to assess indirectness. For further information about this procedure, see Mir (1994).

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APPENDIX

Familiar/Power+: A boss asks his/her secretary 1) to stay after office hours to work on a report, 2) to prepare some coffee and bring it to the office, 3) to make photocopies of a report and send them to some clients, 4)to help him/her file documents under a new system.

Familiar/Power=: A friend asks another friend 5) to borrow some class notes, 6) to get help to study for a test; 7) to clean the kitchen, 8) to pay for lunch.

Familiar/Power-: A student asks his/her professor 9) for a ride home, 10) for an extension on a paper, 11) to read a paper the student has written for a conference and give an opinion on it, 12) to lend him/her a library book that the professor has.

Unfamiliar/Power+: A boss asks his/her new secretary 13) to type a report, 14) to come to the office on Saturday morning to work on a report, 15) to bring him/her a sandwich from the cafeteria, 16) to make plane reservations.

Unfamiliar/Power=: A student asks another student 17) to borrow the student's computer, 18) to take a picture, 19) to move over in the bus, 20) to use a chair in the cafeteria.

Unfamiliar/Power-: A student asks his/her new professor 21) for an assignment, 22) to lend him/her a book that just came out, 23) for a copy of a conference paper the professor has written, and 24) to read a paper that the student has written for a journal and give an opinion on it.